Amsterdam University Press

Chapter Title: Yes We Can, This Is It America and Celebrity Culture

Book Title: Fabricating the Absolute Fake

Book Subtitle: America in Contemporary Pop Culture - Revised Edition

Book Author(s): Jaap Kooijman

Published by: Amsterdam University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wp7ck.11

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/.

Amsterdam University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*

This content downloaded from 35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

6. *Yes We Can, This Is It*

America and Celebrity Culture

When on January 20, 2009, Beyoncé sang "At Last" at the inaugural Neighborhood Ball, with President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama performing the opening dance, one could not ignore the song's symbolic significance. Broadcast live by ABC, the performance connected the most popular African-American female pop star of the moment to the first-ever African-American president of the United States of America. Originally from the musical film *Orchestra Wives* (Archie Mayo, 1942) starring Glenn Miller and his Orchestra, "At Last" is best known in its 1961 R&B version by soul singer Etta James and as such has become part of the soundtrack of the 1960s civil rights movement. The song's title evokes a connection to the spiritual words quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr. in his 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!" Dressed in an elegant silver gown and looking more like a fairy-tale princess than a global pop star, Beyoncé serenades the slow-waltzing presidential couple, turning the performance into the most romantic moment of the inaugural festivities. However, the performance of "At Last" has a double function, not only highlighting the moment's romantic character, but most of all celebrating that with the election of the first African-American president, more than forty-five years after King's speech, the boundaries of race have finally been overcome. "At last," Beyoncé sings, "I found a dream that I can speak to, a dream I can call my own."

Much of the performance's symbolic power resides in the combination of politics and pop culture, as Beyoncé's star image is connected to the political promise that the election of Obama exemplifies. Sung by an African-American superstar with global appeal, "At Last" becomes an "ideological validation" of the American Dream, as Ellis Cashmore has argued: "The power of Beyoncé [is] in her living of the Dream, not just singing about it."[1] Together, Beyoncé and Obama present a compelling image of African-American achievement.

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Yet what does Beyoncé's performance of "At Last" actually signify, asks Farah Jasmine Griffin – "The fulfillment of our democratic principles? The achievement of a color-blind, post-racial America?" – only to conclude that the election of the first African-American president may make America less racist but not post-racial: "Too often in public discourse the phrase 'post-racial' is used to suggest that black people and their allies should cease raising concerns about continued racial inequality."[2] Rather than representing a post-racial reality, the performance signifies its possibility in the shape of reality, as a hyperreality. Beyoncé and Obama function as a "utopia achieved," as Jean Baudrillard would say, in which the fictional character of the American Dream enables a seemingly paradoxical moment of "post-raciality" that can be pursued through the visualization of its achievement.[3] In other words, as success stories showing how the boundaries of race have been overcome, Beyoncé and Obama reaffirm the belief that the boundaries of race can and will be overcome.

As the title of his book *Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (2006) makes explicitly clear, the narrative of the American Dream plays a prominent role in Barack Obama's political message (although in the book, Obama merely mentions "the American Dream" twice, let alone provides a specific definition, suggesting that its meaning is considered to be self-evident). In his book and speeches, Obama perceives the American Dream as a collective aim for the American people but also recognizes that for many individuals, particularly minorities, "their hold on that dream remains tenuous."[4] Instead of focusing on his political message, this chapter addresses how Obama, or rather his image, has come to embody this American ideology. "Barack knows the American Dream because he's lived it," his wife Michelle Obama reminded television viewers in 2012, "and he wants everyone in this country to have that same opportunity, no matter who we are, or where we're from, or what we look like, or who we love."[5] As Karen Sternheimer states in her book *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream*, "we are complicit in our desire to believe that the idea of the American Dream is real, and celebrity stories help us enjoy the dream vicariously."[6] Obama is similar to other American celebrities whose individual stories of talent, perseverance, and success are continuously recycled in the media, thereby reinforcing the American Dream's ideological power. While Sternheimer speaks from an exclusively American point of view, I suggest that this desire extends beyond the geographical boundaries of the United States of America. Similar to the stars of USA for Africa's "We Are the World," who functioned as global ambassadors of American ideology (as argued in chapter one), Beyoncé and Obama are part of an American celebrity culture that is mediated worldwide, thereby spreading the ideal of the American Dream at a global level.

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

During the presidential elections campaign of 2008 and afterwards, Barack Obama has often been interviewed about his taste in pop culture, ranging from his favorite Hollywood movies and television series to the songs on his iPod. In one such interview, Obama revealed that his taste does not always match that of his wife Michelle: "She likes *American Idol*, her and the girls, in a way that I don't entirely get." In his essay "Pop Culture in the Age of Obama," Kurt Anderson takes this revelation to raise a significant point about Obama's political success, as "the democratic spectacle of *American Idol* is of a piece with Obamaism, of course, given that the show is all about the excitement of watching a telegenic, talented nobody transformed by national referendum into a celebrity."[7] Anderson is not the first one to point out that the comparison to reality television is an apt way to understand political elections, although it is the sports metaphor that tends to be used most often in the media. Discussing the media spectacle of politics, Douglas Kellner perceives the 2008 Democratic Party presidential primaries as a reality television show: "For the media and the candidates alike, the Democratic Party was like *Survivor* or *The Apprentice* ('You're fired!'), with losing candidates knocked out week by week. With the two standing candidates Obama and [Hillary] Clinton, it was like *The Amazing Race*, *American Gladiator*, and *American Idol* all rolled into one, with genuine suspense building over the outcome."[8] As political elections have become media spectacles, the contestants continuously have to present themselves as "authentic" personalities – just as contestants on reality television shows have to – in an attempt to win the sympathy and support of the viewing and voting audience.

As already stated in the introduction to *Fabricating the Absolute Fake*, comparing candidates of political elections to contestants on reality television shows does not imply that these media events are the same. There is a difference between being elected president of the United States of America and becoming the nation's next pop idol through televoting and text messaging. Recognizing the similarities, however, helps to highlight how pop culture and politics often are intertwined in the contemporary media landscape. *American Idol* (Fox, 2002-present) is a particularly appropriate example, as this show quite explicitly addresses questions of national identity through the use of pop culture. Perhaps surprisingly, *American Idol* is not an originally American program, but instead is based on a global television format that originated in the United Kingdom. Other similar programs broadcast on American television, including *Popstars* (WB, 2001), *X Factor* (Fox, 2011-present), and *The Voice* (NBC, 2011-present), were also initiated and developed elsewhere, in,

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

respectively, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. Yet the "American" character of these shows is quite evident, as the majority of the pop songs performed by the contestants on all the different national and regional adaptations are culled from American pop culture. Moreover, as Katherine Meizel points out in her book on *American Idol*, the global television format is inspired by the mythology of the American Dream. Meizel quotes the show's co-creator Simon Cowell telling CNN's Larry King that they "tried to sell it initially as the great American Dream … which is somebody who could be a cocktail waitress one minute, within sixteen weeks could become the most famous person in America."[9]

American Idol is based on the premise that in principle anybody can become a star, regardless of one's social-economic, cultural, or ethnic background. At the auditions held in different cities across the country, the candidates can win a "Golden Ticket" to Hollywood where the live shows are broadcast, building on the notion of "Hollywood as the locus of the American Dream, as the site where that Dream becomes reality (or, at least, reality [television] programming)."[10] As Katherine Meizel explains:

> The American Dream is a mythology not defined by a singular narrative but by a collection of overlapping stories tracing some transformation of identity – a mutability of place, class, even ethnicity. Intertwined dreams of migration or immigration, financial opportunity, and social recognition all hinge upon movement and risk; whether they are about fame or fortune (or both at once), or plainer goals such as education or home ownership, they are all dreams of moving up, moving on. … Several such narratives of aspiration, ambition, and the hope of achievement coalesce in Hollywood, where *American Idol* explores and exploits them all.[11]

Although *American Idol* does give viewers a slightly revealing glimpse of how the culture industry constructs pop stardom, most of all the show reinforces the notion that stardom is based on the talent and effort of individuals. By focusing not only on the vocal performances of the contestants but also on their personal histories and social-economic backgrounds – through documentary-style segments and interviews with friends and family members – the show emphasizes their individual quests for stardom, their attempts to make their own American Dream come true. As such, *American Idol* can promote itself as an "ideal meritocracy," as Matthew Wheelock Stahl has argued, supposedly mirroring American society in the way its contestants/citizens have equal access to individual success, while structural constraints caused by social-economic or other conditions as well as the economic logic of the culture industry are downplayed as personal obstacles to be overcome.[12]

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This is not to suggest that the notion of an ideal meritocracy is unique to *American Idol*, as it also plays an important role in other national and regional adaptations of the global television format. All these shows are based on what Richard Dyer has called the success myth of stardom, which has its roots in the American Dream. Rather than sheer products of the culture industry, stars need to be recognized for their individual talent, combining ordinariness (they are just like us) with extraordinariness (they have a special talent just waiting to be discovered). Similar to the American Dream, the success myth of stardom is democratic in the sense that it is, at least in theory, achievable for anybody who is talented and hardworking.[13] In her analysis of the British *Pop Idol*, Su Holmes builds on Dyer's argument to highlight how the success myth extends beyond the show's contestants: "The emphasis on the ordinariness of the contestants contributes to a deliberate blurring of boundaries between contestant and viewer and, as a result, a potential invocation of the audience's own aspirations (or fantasies) of success and stardom."[14] By bridging the gap between contestants and audience, reality television shows such as *American Idol* and *Pop Idol* reaffirm the notion of an ideal meritocracy, implying that, at least in democratic societies, individual success is within everybody's reach.

In her essay on *American Idol* (aptly titled "We Are the World"), Erica Jean Bochanty-Aguero convincingly argues that the show is "not just an 'American' singing competition," but a program that "presents a multifaceted notion of 'Americanness' … within a non-U.S. global TV franchise and a complex global mediascape."[15] Compared to other national and regional adaptations, *American Idol* is exceptional in its ability to claim to be the "true original," in spite of being based on a global television format, as the program is a showcase of American pop culture. Moreover, in contrast to the other national and regional adaptations, *American Idol* is not only broadcast in its home country but also in about 130 countries around the world, reinforcing its double-bind staging as exceptionally American as well as universal. The show's host most often addresses the viewers literally as Americans, in spite of the show also being broadcast outside of the United States.[16] At times, the show has been overtly patriotic, particularly during its second season (January-May 2003) when *American Idol* supported the American troops in the Iraq War by having the ten finalists release a cover version of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA" as a chart-topping single. In addition to promoting meritocracy as a national value in the shape of the American Dream, *American Idol* presents democracy as a national value, specifically based on the participation of the audience as voters. Although the voting system rightfully can be denounced as a clever method to capitalize on the willingness of viewers to pay for casting their votes by phone, there is validity to the claim that in this way "the people" democrati-

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

cally choose their favorite pop star. Here the connection to the "real" political elections becomes most apparent. As Bochanty-Aguero suggests, "*American Idol* self-consciously promotes an imaginary democracy that, in turn, allows us to feel (if only for a moment) that democracy 'really' exists beyond the *Idol* stage in the United States."[17] Whether or not one agrees with the suggestion that *American Idol* functions as a Baudrillardian simulacrum, the way the reality television program mirrors the American ideological practices of democracy and meritocracy cannot be ignored, thereby revealing the intertwinement of politics with pop culture.

"I was just wondering if you would give any thought to being on *American Idol* or *America's Got Talent*?" a news reporter asked Barack Obama in June 2012. "You'd be a big hit, Mr. President."[18] The question was prompted by Obama's performance at the New York Apollo Theater a few months earlier, where Obama sang a couple of lines of Al Green's R&B classic "Let's Stay Together" during a fundraising speech. His impromptu soulful rendition of the song was immediately picked up by the media and received praise from many commentators, resulting in a tweet from *American Idol* producer Nigel Lythgoe, who invited Obama to sing a duet with Al Green on the television show.[19] Obama never appeared on *American Idol*, but he did perform on the talk show *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* (NBC, 2009-present) where, on April 24, 2012, he "slow-jammed the news," talking about student loan legislation over a R&B back-beat played by the hip-hop band the Roots. The studio audience ecstatically cheered him on, suggesting that there is indeed a thin line between being the American president and a celebrated pop idol. In response to the television news reporter, however, Obama made it clear that he has no intention to perform on a show like *American Idol*, jokingly saying that it would embarrass his wife and children too much. True to the success myth of stardom, Obama presented himself as an "authentic" personality by showing the ordinary person behind the extraordinary politician, while simultaneously reminding the viewers that the American president is not America's next pop idol after all: "I'm going to try to keep my singing to the shower most of the time."[20]

The Biggest Celebrity in the World

The July 2008 "Celeb" advertisement by the John McCain presidential campaign shows footage of more than two hundred thousand Germans chanting "Obama! Obama! Obama!" in Berlin, intercut with images of pop celebrities Paris Hilton and Britney Spears, with the clicking sound of paparazzi taking photographs. A female voiceover exclaims: "He is the biggest celebrity in the

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

world. But is he ready to lead?" The advertisement connects the then presidential candidate Barack Obama to the superficiality of American yet globally mediated pop culture, suggesting that behind the façade of pop celebrity exists a political reality that needs to be revealed. "Higher taxes, foreign oil. That's the *real* Obama." Whatever one thinks of the advertisement, two of its claims make perfect sense. First, Obama can be perceived as a celebrity. The spectacle of politics, particularly during election campaigns, consists of media events in which popular politicians function similarly to other media personalities such as movie stars and pop stars. Second, Obama does have a remarkable global appeal, capturing the imagination (at least in 2008) of many Americans as well as many other "fans" outside of the United States of America. As Douglas Kellner has pointed out, by going on a "Global Tour" during the summer of 2008 – visiting Afghanistan, Iraq, and several European countries – Obama became part of a media spectacle that went beyond the scope of the American presidential elections, aimed at both American and international television audiences, which "established [Obama] as a global celebrity."[21] Not only in the United States of America but also in many different parts of the world, people were inspired by Obama's "Yes We Can!" message of hope and change, making him, as Sean Redmond states, "a spectacular celebrity politician who resonates profoundly and prophetically at a global level."[22]

Not so much the claim that Obama is a celebrity but the specific comparison to Paris Hilton and Britney Spears makes the advertisement significant. The McCain campaign may have defended the advertisement by correctly pointing out that Hilton and Spears were the most Googled global celebrities of that moment. But more importantly, the two young white women embody a negative interpretation of celebrity, as they are widely perceived as being "famous for being famous" (in Hilton's case) or as an empty, lip-synching product of the entertainment industry (in Spears's case). Taken together, Hilton and Spears exemplify the downside of celebrity culture, which has been visualized best by a paparazzi picture of the two "out-of-control celebs" on the cover of a special issue of *Newsweek* magazine entitled "The Girls Gone Wild Effect" (12 February 2007). Whereas the success myth of stardom reinforces the belief in the American Dream, with celebrities as its living proof, the sensational tabloid press stories present the shady side of stardom, emphasizing negative qualities ranging from triviality and superficiality to immorality. Particularly female celebrity tends to be perceived negatively, hence the prominent presence of Hilton and Spears in the tabloid press. As Su Holmes and Diane Negra have argued, "a major strand of the coverage of physically, emotionally and/or financially 'out of control' female celebrities is predicted on public fears that we don't know what talent is anymore and that the traditional expectation that

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

fame is based on talent is dying out, giving rise to a set of 'illegitimate' female celebrities who are famous for 'nothing.'"[23] By connecting Obama to this kind of tabloid-style, gendered representation of celebrity, emphasizing its superficiality, triviality, and immorality, the McCain advertisement tried to ridicule and curtail Obama's "star power," thus attempting to place him outside of the (male) realm of traditional "serious" politics.

In a thought-provoking essay on the connection between the relatively uncritical media coverage of the Bush administration's war effort in Iraq and the disproportionately harsh media war on Britney Spears, Anna Watkins Fisher argues that the combination of hard and soft news results in a complex mutual dependency. Fisher opens with a scene from the documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), in which images of Iraqi civilian war victims are placed in juxtaposition to footage of Britney Spears exclaiming: "I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes and we should just support that."[24] Whereas documentary maker Michael Moore undoubtedly used Spears to emphasize the political ignorance of the American public, Fisher takes the scene as a starting point to explore how President George W. Bush and Britney Spears are part of the same "infotainment" media landscape, in which seriousness is merged with triviality. By presenting the trivial news about Spears side by side to the serious news about the Iraq War, the media suggest that the two are not only comparable, but also equally relevant to the public debate. In this way, stories about Britney Spears – her emotional breakdowns, unfit motherhood, and outrageous behavior in the nightclub scene – are equated with the news reports on the presence of weapons of mass destruction that were used to justify the American war effort. Yet, as Fisher convincingly argues, these stories are also placed in opposition to each other: "By presenting moralistic narratives that attack celebrities like Spears for being unfit, unreliable, and uncontrolled, politicians like Bush are seen as being more real, trustworthy, and mastered in their actions, lulling us into a false dichotomy and, against her will, making Britney into Bush's alibi."[25] The combination of soft and hard news thus results in a complex realm of infotainment, in which the boundaries between triviality and seriousness seem to disappear, yet still can be used to keep the distinction intact.

Paris Hilton functions in a similar manner as Britney Spears within this realm of infotainment, as her triviality is placed in contrast to the serious news but also challenges its importance. For example, on the morning of June 26, 2007, Mika Brzezinski, anchorwoman of the television news show *Morning Joe* (MSNBC, 2007-present), repeatedly refused to open with the news that Hilton had been released from jail after serving a three-week sentence for a traffic violation. During the live television broadcast, Brzezinski insisted that instead

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the program should open with the news that Republican Senator Richard Lugar no longer supported the Bush administration's strategy in the Iraq War. In spite of Brzezinski's rather playful attempts to shred her notes and setting them on fire, the show's editors would not change the order. Brzezinski's refusal became a hit on YouTube. Tellingly, as she admits in her autobiography, it was her refusal to read the Paris Hilton story, rather than her actual reading of the serious news, that gave Brzezinski a career boost, and, at least for a very short moment, made her almost as famous as Hilton herself.[26] The incident reveals the contradictory character of Paris Hilton's fame, which on the one hand is deemed trivial and unworthy of attention, while on the other, never fails to receive worldwide coverage by the news media. In his comprehensive analysis of Paris Hilton's star image, Thomas Fahy argues that both the admiration and the humiliation of Hilton define her fame: "Paris Hilton – at her most glamorous, most erotic, and most embarrassed – provides her audience, particularly those who feel disenfranchised by economic inequality, with an outlet for their fantasies and frustrations."[27] In this way, Hilton's star image contains seemingly contradicting values, showing not only the benefits of social and economic success that one can strive for, but also the scandalous downside of celebrity culture to be ridiculed and pitied. Hilton knowingly "plays" with her infamous image, as becomes apparent in the parody of the McCain advertisement she released online, with a male voiceover calling McCain "the oldest celebrity in the world, like super old," intercut with images of the actresses from the sitcom *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985-1992) and CNN host Larry King. Emphasizing her reputation as a blond bimbo by sun tanning at a poolside, Hilton first thanks the "wrinkly white-haired guy" for his endorsement and then presents a rather sophisticated, bipartisan energy policy plan, only to conclude that if she ever becomes president, she will paint the White House pink.

In 2004, after his keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention had made him a nationally known politician, Barack Obama gave a talk at the annual Gridiron Club Dinner, where journalists and politicians meet to poke fun at the seriousness of politics. Referring to the recent media attention he was receiving, Obama joked: "Andy Warhol said we all get our fifteen minutes of fame. I've already had an hour-and-a-half. I mean, I'm so overexposed, I'm making Paris Hilton look like a recluse."[28] By 2008, Obama's fame had skyrocketed, suggesting that indeed he was "the biggest celebrity in the world." His face appeared not only on the covers of current affairs magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, but also on the covers of lifestyle and fashion magazines, including, among many others, *Vanity Fair* (March 2007), *GQ* (September 2007), *Esquire* (June 2008), *Men's Health* (November 2008), and *Men's Vogue* (October 2008). Obama made multiple appearances on popular television shows such as *Late*

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Show with David Letterman (CBS, 1993-present), *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* (NBC, 2003-present), and *The Daily Show with John Stewart* (Comedy Central, 1999-present). For the first time in its history, *Rolling Stone* magazine endorsed a presidential candidate, placing Obama as "A New Hope" twice on its cover (March 2008 and July 2008). The famous "HOPE" poster designed by Shepard Fairey turned Obama into a Warholesque pop art icon, an image that traveled around the world and came to symbolize Obama's stardom.[29] Such an overall emphasis on Obama's star image over his "real" political standpoints (as the McCain advertisement had pointed out) follows the strategies of the culture industry in its manipulation of audiences. Indeed, as Douglas Kellner has argued, there is a need for a media-savvy and critical public that can recognize and look beyond the spectacle of politics. Yet, simultaneously, it was the spectacle of Obama as "super celebrity" that enabled him to become "a new politician that embodied change and could bring together people of different colors, ethnicities, ages, regions, and political views," in the United States of America as well as in many other countries around the world.[30]

The President of Black Cool

Whereas the McCain campaign tried to make a negative association by comparing Barack Obama to white female celebrity, African-American entertainment and lifestyle magazines made a positive association by connecting him to black male celebrity. Obama is pictured on the covers of hip-hop magazines such as *Vibe* (September 2007), stating "It's Obama Time" with a smooth-looking Obama checking his watch, and *The Source* (November 2008), featuring Obama with the blurbs "Hip-Hop Stand Up!" and "Get Out the Vote." The special "Black Cool" issue of *Ebony* (August 2008) has Obama topping the list of "The 25 Coolest Brothers of All Time," which includes a wide range of African-American male actors, singers, politicians, and athletes. To highlight the special issue, the magazine has eight different covers, one featuring Barack Obama, the others movie actors Billy Dee Williams, Denzel Washington, and Samuel L. Jackson, singers Marvin Gaye and Prince, rapper Jay-Z, and boxing legend Muhammad Ali. As the cover text reads, these men have the "swagger, confidence, [and] effortless style" that makes them "Black Cool." Inside the magazine, cool is defined as "a type of permanent relaxation despite whatever circumstances you find yourself in," which also makes clear why *Ebony* magazine considers cool to be such an important element of African-American culture: "If America built its society on efforts to keep Black folk perpetually off balance, cool was the ultimate retaliation – a way of not only remaining balanced, but making it

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

look effortless."[31] Instead of connecting him to the artificiality and shallowness of celebrity culture, the magazine uses stardom to highlight Obama's blackness and masculinity as powerful cultural and political qualities.

Such an emphasis on Obama's black masculinity also becomes apparent in the public relationship that Barack and Michelle Obama share with "J. and B." – rapper Jay-Z (who, like Obama, was featured on one of *Ebony*'s "Black Cool" covers) and his wife Beyoncé, also known as "the first couple of hip-hop." Ever since they actively supported Obama's campaign, the highlight being Beyoncé's performance of "At Last" at the inaugural festivities, Jay-Z and Beyoncé have been in contact with the presidential couple, including a highly publicized visit to the White House. "[I've got] Obama on the text," brags Jay-Z in his hip-hop song "On To the Next One," a claim that Obama has confirmed. On several occasions, Obama has referred to Jay-Z, ranging from stating to be a fan of his music (even openly favoring him over rapper Kanye West) to recognizing him as a personal friend.[32] Whereas Barack bonds with Jay-Z, Michelle Obama has befriended Beyoncé, revealing the clear gender division in the public relationship of mutual admiration between the two celebrity power couples. On her personal website, Beyoncé published a handwritten open letter to the first lady, praising her as "the ultimate example of a strong African-American woman," and adding the personal message: "Michelle, thank you so much for everything u [sic] do for us – I am *proud* to have my daughter grow up in a world where she has people like you, to look up to."[33] Obama, in turn, sent Beyoncé a tweet, thanking her "for the beautiful letter and for being a role model who kids everywhere can look up to," and later revealed to *People* magazine (28 May 2012) that, if she could trade places with anybody, she would love to be Beyoncé.[34] Together, the two highly successful African-American women "occupy a space unimagined by earlier generations," as Farah Griffin has argued: "A singing, dancing, acting black woman, who is also an entertainment mogul, and an Ivy League-educated, Harvard-trained lawyer-cum-first lady clearly herald something new."[35] In spite of this gender division, connecting Barack to Jay-Z and Michelle to Beyoncé, it is actually the combination of the two power couples that makes them such an effective manifestation of how politics and pop culture can be mutually reinforcing, together symbolizing the possibility of a "post-racial" era.

In his essay "Buying Beyoncé," Ellis Cashmore discusses the star image of Beyoncé as an embodiment of America's "new racial order," as she, together with other African-American celebrities, presents "a new image of talented, determined and noticeably wealthy African Americans who resisted grumbling about racism."[36] Cashmore specifically names actor Bill Cosby and television talk show host Oprah Winfrey as early symbols of the new racial order that

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Beyoncé embodies. Cosby starred as Cliff Huxtable in the most popular sitcom of the 1980s, *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992), which focused on the daily life of an upper-middle-class African-American family. In their groundbreaking study of *The Cosby Show* published in 1992, Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis recognize the sitcom's progressive character, as *The Cosby Show* successfully defied the stereotypical representation of African-Americans on television. Yet, they are also critical of the way *The Cosby Show* reinforced the ideology of the American Dream: "The fact that the Huxtables are an African-American family is central to this [ideological] process: their success assures us that in the United States everyone, regardless of race or creed, can enjoy material success."[37] During the Reagan-Bush 1980s, African-American middle-class affluence became more visible in popular culture, while the average economic position of African-Americans worsened for the first time since the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Jhally and Lewis do not blame Cosby for his material success (Cosby actually had financed the study), but they do point out that Cosby functioned as visible "proof" that structural racism no longer exists and that economic success is solely a product of individual effort, in accordance with the meritocratic ideology of the American Dream.

Two decades later, this conclusion still holds. Like Bill Cosby, African-American celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Beyoncé and Jay-Z, and indeed Barack and Michelle Obama are embodiments of the American Dream, "proving" that social-economic success is within everybody's reach and that racial boundaries can be overcome. "I'm universal," Beyoncé says in *Vogue* magazine (April 2009): "No one's paying attention to what race I am. I've kind of proven myself. I'm past that."[38] Similar to the way *The Cosby Show* ideologically works because the sitcom is about an African-American family, Beyoncé can make such a claim of "universality" and "post-raciality" *because* she is African-American. Here the Oprah connection becomes relevant. Oprah Winfrey endorsed Obama in a television interview with CNN's Larry King (25 September 2006), three months before Obama had announced that he would run for president. Winfrey endorsed Obama not only because she supported his political standpoints, but most of all because she believed in the message of hope and change that he embodied. When, on October 18, 2006, Obama visited *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to promote his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Winfrey explained why she believed Obama should run for president. "I know I don't just speak for myself. There are a lot of people who want to feel the audacity of hope, who want to feel that America can be a better place for everybody." Subsequently, Winfrey made Obama promise that if he decided to run, he would make the announcement on her show. "I don't think I could say no to you," Obama responded, adding "Oprah, you're my girl."[39] Much has been written about the

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

so-called "Oprah effect," including studies by political scientists determining the exact amount of extra votes Obama won in the 2008 Democratic primaries and the presidential elections because of Winfrey's endorsement.[40] Far more relevant, however, is the fact that Winfrey connected Obama to the success myth of stardom and the representation of African-American achievement. As Ellis Cashmore has pointed out, Winfrey's endorsement gave the Obama campaign "credibility and purpose," as the "race-transcendent" Oprah Winfrey placed Barack Obama within a tradition of African-American celebrities who defied racial boundaries, including the notion that "a black man will never be President."[41]

The candidacy and eventual election of Barack Obama may reinforce the meritocratic ideology of the American Dream, thereby rendering structural racism invisible, but that does not diminish its empowering impact. "So long as the fact that [Obama's] skin is not white *matters*, his image has democratizing power," Susan Buck-Morss writes in her essay on Obama's image. As she explains:

> [The Obama image] inspires by making visible the self-proclaimed ideal that what binds this nation of immigrants is not color or ethnicity, but adherence to principles of democratic rule, equal opportunity, and universal inclusion. … Rather than building a coalition of specific interest groups, [Obama] addresses a general public, neither black nor white, neither Republican nor Democrat, but rather the *United* States of America. It is what we could be, not what we are.[42]

What the last line in the above quote emphasizes is that Obama's image is not about what has been achieved but what could be achieved, showing the (arguably utopian) possibility of an America that transcends racial divisions and party politics. Yet, Buck-Morss also recognizes the limitations of the image's democratizing power once Obama actually becomes president: "While the image of Obama may travel with ease and have global appeal, his office is rigidly determined by national sovereignty. He becomes President of the largest military power in the world; the color of his skin had not made this arsenal one iota less dangerous."[43] Similar to the way Obama's image (including his blackness) reinforces the ideology of the American Dream, which can be empowering with its promise of a post-racial society yet which does not end structural racism, Obama's image may present a promise of hope and change that resonates worldwide, yet does not necessarily challenge the structural distribution of political, economic, and military power at a global level.

In pop culture, however, these structural macro-political issues seem

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

less pertinent and compelling than the promise that Obama's image embodies. The promise of Obama is at the core of the "Yes We Can" viral music video by will.i.am, the African-American front man of the hip-hop group the Black Eyed Peas. Based on Obama's famous speech of January 8, 2008, "Yes We Can" sets Obama's spoken words to music, performed by, among others, Herbie Hancock on piano. In a call-and-response mode, Obama's words are repeated by a host of American celebrities, including actresses Scarlett Johansson and Tracee Ellis Ross, basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, former Pussycat Dolls singer Nicole Scherzinger, and R&B singer John Legend. In a poem-style article entitled "Why I Recorded *Yes We Can*," will.i.am explains the music video's universal (yet American) message: "and I'm not talking about a 'black thing' / I'm talking about a 'human thing' me as a 'person' / an American... / … / what America is 'supposed' to be... / freedom... / equality... / and truth..."[44] The music video literally translates Obama's political message into a pop song. When "Yes We Can" won an Emmy Award in the category of "Best New Approaches in Daytime Entertainment," the music video's producers emphasized its global reach, stating that "we hope our video continues to virally connect with people around the world and spread the inspirational messaging of our next President, Barack Obama."[45] The "Yes We Can" music video uses the different elements that make Obama's image so compelling, connecting him to black male celebrity as well as presenting him as a race-transcending symbol, recognizing him as living proof of the American Dream as well as a global pop star who appeals to "everybody," regardless of ethnicity, social-economic background, and nationality. As such, "Yes We Can" functions as Obama's "We Are the World," using American celebrity culture to spread its message of hope and change around the world.

It Doesn't Matter if You're Black or White

On June 25, 2009, just a couple of weeks before he was to start his "This Is It" series of fifty sold-out concerts in London, Michael Jackson died. The news of his death caused a worldwide media frenzy, replacing the coverage of the "twitter revolution" in Iran as the global trending topic. To the surprise of many news reporters, President Barack Obama waited two weeks before he personally commented on the pop star's sudden death. Obama called Jackson "one of the greatest entertainers," adding that "I grew up on his music, [I] still have all his stuff on my iPod." Yet, Obama also distanced himself from the pop star by emphasizing Jackson's "tragic and in many ways sad personal life."[46] Whereas President Ronald Reagan could praise Michael Jackson as an example of the American Dream back in 1984 (as discussed in chapter one), Obama

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

refrained from recognizing Jackson's significance beyond the realm of entertainment, including the impact Jackson may have had on Obama's own presidency. Obama's reluctance is understandable, as Michael Jackson's reputation had taken a downfall due to the many controversies concerning his eccentric lifestyle, changing physical appearance, and, most of all, the repeated accusations of child abuse. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two African-American men remain significant. Barack Obama and Michael Jackson both seem to transcend or defy the boundaries of race; they both are media personalities who have succeeded in becoming popular among a broad and multiethnic group of followers, in the USA as well as worldwide; and they both embody a message of racial harmony and global unity.

In his book on the cultural significance of Barack Obama, Jabari Asim suggests that Michael Jackson, among other African-American male artists such as Prince, has helped to pave the road that led Barack Obama to the White House. Moreover, he recognizes the similarities in their messages, as Jackson and Obama both envision a world free of racial obsessions and both call out for social change:

> Jackson sings, "We Are the world"; Obama declares, "we are the ones we have been waiting for." In "Heal the World," Jackson urges us to "make it a better place"; Obama's speech declaring his candidacy talks about "building a better America." In "Man in the Mirror," Jackson's most stirring call to action, the fiery chorus urges listeners to "make that… change!" Accepting his party's nomination in Denver, Obama announced, "It's time for us to change America." … Just a few performers (if any) can lay claim to influencing notions of racial conciliation to the degree that Jackson has; no political figure since Martin Luther King, Jr. has forged alliances across racial boundaries with the skill and impact that Obama has shown.[47]

Jabari Asim is not the only one who has made an explicit connection between Michael Jackson and Barack Obama. During Jackson's memorial service, broadcast live on television around the world on July 7, 2009, the focus understandably was not on his controversial reputation but on his artistry and cultural legacy, including an all-star performance of "We Are the World" and "Heal the World." One of the speakers, Reverend Al Sharpton, the former civil rights activist and one-time contender for the presidential nomination of the Democratic Party, stated that Jackson had fulfilled his "dream that changed culture all over the world," thereby placing him within the discourse of the American Dream, yet one that extends beyond the geographical boundaries of the American nation-state:

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

> It was Michael Jackson that [sic] brought blacks and whites and Asians and Latinos together. It was Michael Jackson that [sic] made us sing "We Are the World." … Because Michael Jackson kept going, he created a comfort level where people that felt they were separate became interconnected with his music. It was that comfort level that kids from Japan and Ghana and France and Iowa and Pennsylvania got comfortable enough with each other so later it wasn't strange to us to watch Oprah [Winfrey] on television. … Those young kids grew up from being teenage comfortable fans of Michael to being forty years old and being comfortable to vote for a person of color to be the president of the United States of America.

Significant in Sharpton's speech is that he makes no distinction between America and "the world," thereby suggesting that Jackson's message of racial harmony is universal, bringing together not just the citizens of the United States of America but the entire global population. Although those "kids from Japan and Ghana and France" did not grow up to vote for President Obama, they may have ended up sharing the ideal of a colorblind world that both Michael Jackson and Obama envision and symbolize.

The most explicit example of Michael Jackson's message of racial harmony and global unity is the 1991 hit single "[It Doesn't Matter if You're] Black or White," a cheery pop tune that combines the sounds of white rock and black rap. On November 14, 1991, the eleven-minute long "Black or White" music video premiered simultaneously on the American television channels Fox, BET (Black Entertainment Television), VH1, and MTV. In addition, the music video was shown that same day in twenty-six other countries, reaching an estimated global audience of 500 million.[48] Consisting of two parts, the music video's first part shows Jackson lip-synching and dancing to the song, shifting from one continent to another, performing his trademark moves with Native American, West African, South Asian, and Russian dancers, all dressed in "traditional" costumes. The multicultural world presented by "Black or White" is based on the clichés of global tourism, uncritically celebrating human equality through diversity. In her analysis of the music video, Elizabeth Chin has argued that "these two-dimensional portrayals were part of the point," suggesting that Michael Jackson used the clichéd representations to challenge rather than reaffirm uncritical multiculturalism.[49] Although possible, such an alternative reading seems rather unlikely, as "Black and White" fits within the overall generic and bland multicultural idealism that is typical of Jackson's social message songs and music videos, including "We Are the World" (1985), "Man in the Mirror" (1988), and "Heal the World" (1992). Moreover, the theme of global unity is

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

repeated in the famous morphing sequence, showing the faces of beautiful young men and women of different ethnic origins blend into one harmonious flow as they lip-synch "it's black, it's white, yeah, yeah, yeah." According to Vivian Sobchack, "the music video collapses both difference and otherness into self-sameness as we watch a range of human faces distinctly marked by their difference and otherness morph one into the other in a reversible chain not of resemblance but of smiling similitude."[50] Race or gender no longer matter, in Jackson's utopian worldview. In this way, "Black or White," like "We Are the World," is reminiscent of the universal happiness as promoted by Pepsi and Coca-Cola commercials, presenting a colorblind world in which "we" are all the same in our diversity, emphasizing sameness over global inequality.

The second part of the music video, however, offers the possibility of a more critical perspective on such happy and carefree multiculturalism. While the cheery pop song ends and the taping of the morphing scene is over, the music video continues, showing a black panther (perhaps too obviously connoting America's politics of race) descending into the basement of the film studio only to morph into Michael Jackson. In the basement is a film set, a deserted urban "ghetto" street, providing a space for Jackson to dance and howl in a rather aggressive and sexually charged manner, a grim version of the famous Gene Kelly "Singing in the Rain" musical scene. The violence cumulates in Jackson smashing car windows and throwing a trashcan through a shop window, the latter referring to a key scene in *Do the Right Thing* (Spike Lee, 1989). Yet, in spite of the black panther, the ghetto, and the Spike Lee reference, the initial music video does not contain explicit clues to "explain" Jackson's rage and aggression. In a later version, at the request of the record company, racist graffiti has been added – "No More Wetbacks," "Hitler Lives," "Nigger Go Home," "KKK Rules" – not only explaining but also justifying Michael Jackson's aggressive behavior. As a result, the adapted second part rather simplistically reinforces the first part: Jackson calls for a colorblind society and therefore hates racism. However, the original second part invites far more ambiguous interpretations, as the aggression and sexually charged rage remain unexplained. Elizabeth Chin and Tamara Roberts both convincingly point out that the adapted version, with its overt yet incidental racism (the graffiti), obscures the music video's more critical perspective on the less visible yet structural racism.[51] In addition, as I interpret the second part of the music video, Jackson's utopian vision as presented in the first part does come at a price; with "Black or White," Jackson envisions a colorblind society that reduces diversity to blandness, an innocent, almost naïve world which does not recognize difference and otherness, but merely sameness. That loss, whether it be racial, sexual, or another form of difference, may incite the rage that Jackson expresses in the second part of the music video.

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In spite of (or perhaps even because of) its blandness, Jackson's worldview of racial harmony and global unity as expressed in the first part of the "Black and White" music video – and in his other social message songs and music videos – remains a powerful message with a wide appeal. Steven Shaviro perceives Jackson's worldview as a "pop utopia," one that is rooted in "the universality of his music, performance, and persona, [and] his appeal to 'everybody'" and which is based on a belief that eventually racism will cease to exist: "In its singularity, Jackson's music constructed a new 'universal,' one that was very much tied in with hopes for the end of American racism." Yet, as Shaviro continues, this utopian vision cannot be separated from the reality of American race relations: "The utopian moment of Michael Jackson's glory was also the prototype for the determinedly non-utopian progression of black figures beloved by white America – Cosby, Oprah, Obama – whose success has provided an alibi for the continuation of what I can only call the 'racism of everyday life in America' today."[52] In other words, the success stories of African-Americans such as Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama enable a false belief that American society is colorblind, implying that indeed "it doesn't matter if you're black or white." Although Shaviro makes a valid argument, as will be discussed below, he makes a too strict division between Jackson's pop utopia on the one hand, and the actual reality of Winfrey and Obama on the other. To perceive their success stories merely as "non-utopian progression" is missing a powerful element of the star images of both Oprah Winfrey and Barack Obama. They may not be "real" global pop stars, yet they too are part of the globally mediated American celebrity culture, part of Michael Jackson's pop utopia.

This is not to suggest, however, that Steven Shaviro's criticism is incorrect, as the success stories of Winfrey and Obama, but also those of Michael Jackson in his heyday and Beyoncé as well as those of many other African-American celebrities, can be used as excuses to deny structural racism. As the aforementioned study of *The Cosby Show* by Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis pointed out, the visibility of African-American material success in pop culture reinforces the ideological working of the American Dream. If Michael Jackson can become the bestselling pop artist of all time, if Oprah Winfrey can become the most powerful woman on television, if Beyoncé can become a global pop star, and if Barack Obama can become the first African-American president of the United States of America, then racism is no longer an obstacle to individual achievement and social-economic success. That these celebrities are African-American matters not only because they, as role models, can have an empowering or even democratizing impact but most of all because their success can be used to (erroneously) claim that a "post-racial" America already has been achieved.

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

On January 10, 1993, Oprah Winfrey interviewed Michael Jackson live on television, a major media event which was broadcast worldwide and reached an estimated global audience of a 100 million viewers. "Just recently there was a story about you wanting to have a little white boy play you in a Pepsi commercial," says Winfrey, to which Jackson responds: "Why would I want a white child to play me? I'm a black American. I am proud of my race. I am proud of who I am." Subsequently, Jackson uses the opportunity to reveal that he suffers from vitiligo, a disease which causes his skin to lose its pigmentation.[53] The Pepsi commercial in question features Michael Jackson sitting behind a grand piano (with a bottle of Pepsi in plain sight) singing, rather melancholically, the 1970 Jackson 5 hit single "I'll Be There." Then a young Michael Jackson appears as a spectral image (played by an unidentified child actor whose face, through special effects, has been replaced by the face of the actual young Jackson) and joins the adult Jackson in duet. Subsequently, the two Michaels share "a spectral Pepsi across generations," but, as Tavia Nyong'o has pointed out, "the child is … not little Michael at all but an actor, a prop, a puppet through which to ventriloquize the recorded voice of the actual Michael, just as the Pepsi is just a commodity facsimile of actual happiness."[54] Used in a global advertising campaign to promote Jackson's 1993 Pepsi-sponsored Dangerous World Tour, the commercial was never aired in the USA, which is significant considering the fact that the commercial does not conceal Jackson's changing physical appearance (most often perceived as a shift from "black" to "white"), a controversial issue particularly within an American context. However, the commercial does not *highlight* Jackson's changing skin color either, but instead combines the adult Jackson with his younger self to emphasize how Pepsi connects one generation to the next.

Much has been written about Michael Jackson's changing physical appearance in the popular press as well as in academic literature, ranging from crude remarks to insightful discussions. On the one hand, Jackson has been criticized for wanting to be "white," motivated by different reasons, including alleged self-hatred and selling out to mainstream American culture, while on the other, he has been recognized for challenging existing notions of race, gender, and sexuality.[55] Nelson George has suggested that non-American audiences had no problem with Jackson's changing appearance, as they do not share the American history of race relations: "Although Americans, white as well as black, were obsessed with the radical changes in [Jackson's] appearance, the international audiences that passionately supported him … were never concerned about how he used to look."[56] Whether true or not, George's

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

observation raises a significant question about how Jackson's image functions at a global level. Perhaps Jackson's changing physical appearance is not a shift from "black" to "white" but rather one from "full" to "blank," revealing how Jackson's image has become an empty signifier. In his essay on "the real abstraction of Michael Jackson," Jeremy Gilbert discusses the way Jackson has been transformed from an African-American pop-soul-disco singer into a global superstar, with corporate capitalism usurping the progressive elements of black popular culture and turning Michael Jackson into a profitable commodity, resulting in "the idea of Jackson as the global megastar who represents not Black Music but Everybody… which quickly becomes Nobody… which quickly becomes Pepsi."[57] In other words, Jackson has become not "white" but "blank," part of that commercial world of universal happiness that is promoted by Pepsi and Coca-Cola advertisements.

Here a connection can be made to Sean Redmond's notion of Barack Obama as a "liquid celebrity." Redmond perceives Obama as an "avatar" in an attempt to understand how Obama can inspire so many different people around the world. Building on Zygmund Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, Redmond argues that, in the current "world system [that is] ever interconnected and driven increasingly, incessantly by supra-corporate concerns and spectacle based presentations," citizens are disconnected from traditional institutions such as the nation-state, resulting in transience and uncertainty, an overall state of liquidity without a solid cultural center. Liquid celebrities, like Barack Obama, offer these global, disconnected, and disfranchised audiences a sense of belonging, albeit fleetingly. Obama is "the epitome of liquid celebrity ... which promises each and every one of us (so 'inclusive' in its imagined reach) solidarity and belonging but which ultimately confirms our recurring or returning alienation from the modern world."[58] Moreover, this belonging is achieved by promoting Obama according to the rules of commodity advertising, including, as Redmond explicitly points out, the slogans of Pepsi commercials.

Quite fittingly, Obama's 2008 campaign message has been turned – literally – into a 2009 Pepsi commercial. Using the 1973 Pointer Sisters song "Yes We Can Can" as soundtrack, the Pepsi commercial copies the design of the Obama campaign, including its logo, appropriates the slogans "Yes We Can!" and "Hope," and ends with the message "Every generation refreshes the world: now it's your turn." Rather than just a cheap mimicking, however, the Pepsi commercial reveals how much of the Obama image itself is based on the logic of advertising: Obama as "the choice of a new generation," selling his message of hope and change to the world. Like Michael Jackson (and Beyoncé, who has also starred in several Pepsi commercials), Obama is part of a globally mediated yet American celebrity culture in which pop, politics, and advertising

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

merge, a pop utopia that envisions a world in which cultural, racial, and national boundaries have been overcome. Two distinctive ways in which Jackson and Obama function similarly can be distinguished. First, as African-American celebrities, they reconfirm the ideology of the American Dream. Second, as global liquid celebrities, they enable "fans" around the world to feel connected to an overarching sense of inclusiveness and belonging. In both cases, Michael Jackson and Barack Obama embody a compelling promise that might be truly inspiring and empowering, yet remains difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill.

Conclusion: We (Still) Are the World

Twenty-five years after USA for Africa's "We Are the World" was released, a cover version was recorded by the Artists for Haiti to raise money for the victims of the 2010 Haitian earthquake. Again produced by Quincy Jones, the remake closely follows the original, although the sound has been updated: many vocals have been recorded using the new technology of Auto-Tune, and a rap interlude has been added. Through sound and video footage from the original version, even Michael Jackson appears posthumously, like a phantom, singing in duet with his sister Janet, who replaces Diana Ross. Although an international success (appearing in the top of the pop charts in several countries, including the number one position in Belgium and Norway), the 2010 remake hardly made the cultural impact that the original did, which in retrospect was one of the defining global media events of the 1980s. No definite explanation can be given for this difference in impact. One possible reason is the change in the distribution of pop music from analog mass media to digital niche markets, in which MTV, unlike in the 1980s, is no longer the dominant force. Perhaps the remake stayed too close to the original, almost a pastiche or karaoke performance, and as such failed to inspire the imagination of global audiences. Or perhaps its lack of success has to do with the fact that its cast of pop stars was not as well-balanced as that of the original, which had carefully combined stars from different genres and generations to provide a convincing representation of American multiculturalism. The 2010 remake, on the contrary, consists of a hodgepodge of pop stars, combining Justin Bieber, Barbra Streisand, will.i.am, Josh Groban, and Celine Dion with Pink, Akon, Tony Bennett, and Nicole Scherzinger, whereas other major American pop stars with global appeal such as Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, and Lady Gaga as well as veterans such as Madonna and Bruce Springsteen are noticeably absent.

The relative failure of the 2010 remake of "We Are the World" does not mean that the dominance of globally mediated American pop culture has

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

faded, or that worldwide audiences have become less susceptible to America's engine of global hegemony. The message of global unity, spread by the pop stars of the original "We Are the World," promoting a world in which we are all the same in spite of our differences, is still being articulated in many forms of American pop culture. Moreover, American stars and television programs such as *American Idol* (where stars are "made") reinforce the meritocratic ideal of the American Dream, showing that social and economic success is within anyone's reach if they are talented and hardworking. African-American celebrities in particular – Beyoncé and Jay-Z, Oprah Winfrey, and indeed Barack Obama – can function as living proof that the American Dream is real and achievable, that racial and other boundaries have been overcome. The problem is that both the utopian worldview of global unity and the belief in the American Dream tend to render structural social, political, and economic inequality as well as structural racism invisible. We are not all the same; it does matter if you're black or white. Moreover, these ideological messages are wrapped up in the language of commodity advertising. In the end, there is not that much difference between Michael Jackson's pop utopia, Obama's message of hope and change, and the happy universalism of Pepsi.

While he did not participate in the 2010 remake of "We Are the World," Bruce Springsteen, one of the original USA for Africa stars, did join Barack Obama and Jay-Z at the final Democratic campaign rally on the eve of the 2012 American presidential elections. Just before he performs his Obama campaign song "Forward," Springsteen gives a speech. "For the last 30 years I've been writing in my music about the distance between the American Dream and American reality," Springsteen states, adding: "Our vote tomorrow is the one undeniable way we get to determine the distance in that equation."[59] That same evening, Beyoncé publishes another handwritten open letter on her website, this time addressed to Barack Obama: "You are the leader to take us from where we are to where we need to be. You are the reason my daughter and nephew will grow up knowing that they truly can be ANYTHING they want to be."[60] One could easily dismiss these celebrity endorsements as sheer attempts to revitalize the 2012 Obama campaign, which seemed to lack the enthusiasm and urgency of the 2008 one. However, the endorsements by Beyoncé and Springsteen are not only clear examples of how pop and politics are intertwined, but most of all they reveal the strength of the American Dream as a persistent and persuasive belief. As the re-elected President Barack Obama exclaimed in his 2012 victory speech, echoing the words of Michael Jackson: "It doesn't matter whether you're black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, abled, disabled, gay or straight. You can make it here in America if you're willing to try."[61]

This content downloaded from
35.150.148.201 on Fri, 17 Jan 2025 06:46:09 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms